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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the nature of contract learning at institutions set up partially or solely on that basis considering (1) contract learning that takes place as the complete educational experience, and (2) contract learning that takes place as one component of a traditional college or university program. Emphasis is placed on the general nature of learning contracts, the framework for learning contracts, nontraditional student profiles, contract learning as a program component, and program evaluation. A 31-item bibliography is included. (Author/MJM)

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Research Currents

CONTRACT LEARNING
by William Mayville

Contract learning is one important outgrowth of experimentation with nontraditional study formats. Rodney T. Hartnett (Gould 1972, p. 14) makes a useful distinction when he defines nontraditional study as "learning experience . . . not [taking] place under the auspices and supervision of some formally recognized higher education institution [correspondence instruction]; or . . . learning that does take place under such auspices and supervision but differs significantly from the other formal educational efforts taking place there."

Nontraditional educational formats have resulted in such general concepts as independent study and the external degree; and such specific modifications as grading options and totally student designed curricula—all of which were attempts to answer perceived needs of students within and without colleges and universities.

In the recent past a variety of educational formats under the aegis of "nontraditional" study have been proposed and implemented. Contract learning is a variation incorporating most of these modifications. This paper focuses on the nature of contract learning at institutions set up partially or solely on that basis by considering (1) contract learning that takes place as the complete educational experience, and (2) contract learning that takes place as one component of a traditional college or university program.

The learning contract college models considered first include those that are the complete educational experience; that is, they use as a program basis nonresidential, self-directed study, under the guidance of a mentor, that incorporates life experiences and culminates in an associate or baccalaureate degree.

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THE GENERAL NATURE OF LEARNING CONTRACTS

Learning contracts can be variously defined. A working definition for this paper is: a document drawn up by a student and a mentor or advisor that specifies what a student will learn in a given period of time and how. The contract is distinct from traditional course credits or semester equivalents and is evaluated but not graded.

Cyril Houle (1973) identified three schools that employ non-residential educational contracts: Empire State College of the State University of New York (ESC), the Community College of Vermont (CCV), and Minnesota Metropolitan State College (MMSC).*

The general parameters of the contract learning formats are given in the "brochure" of Empire State College. In their first year, students

> might pursue a program of guided study including tutoring in specific areas . . . [and] in the following years, the study pattern could include community service, such as experience in a museum, or social service agency, study at one or more campuses of the University, correspondence study by mail, or study in an urban setting with a recognized writer or artist. Working closely with his mentor, a student in his final year could complete his degree through preparation of a concluding paper or project or through an oral examination given by a panel of mentors (Empire State College 1971, [p.5]).

A Student Contract or Learning Program is defined by Empire State simply as the "detailed description of the learning activities a student will undertake for a specified length of time stated in weeks" (p.73). At the Community College of Vermont the contract is "defined" by breaking it into five parts: program goals, student objectives, list of learning experiences, documentation, and a student narrative, where a student brings together all of his or her learning experiences into one statement to provide an overall view to the degree-awarding Review Boards. These definitions are typical.

At ESC, MMSC, and CCV, prior experience is translated into credit equivalents. At CCV students can satisfy part of the learning plan by taking special group courses if enough

*There are other contract colleges similar to the ones Houle identified. For example, Washington International College in Washington, D.C., is generally similar to the institutions examined in this paper. Its learning contract would conform to the definition given above; however, course credits are given and 120 credit hours are needed for award of a bachelor's degree.

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CCV students express interest; however most learning contracts at ESC, MMSC, and CCV are satisfied by studying independently, by on-the-job training, and by home study. Credit is awarded at ESC, MMSC, and CCV for prior learning documented in portfolios and proven by examinations, transcripts, letters, demonstrations of ability, and so forth.

THE FRAMEWORK FOR LEARNING CONTRACTS

ESC, MMSC, and CCV have established categories or frameworks of learning to help their students to develop an integrated approach to their learning activities.

Empire State uses conceptual and cultural frameworks to aid the student in planning a program. They are Vocational/Professional, Disciplinary, Problem Oriented, and Holistic/Thematic. The College stresses that these areas are not to be considered as separate and distinct and students are not required to satisfy every category.

During the admissions process a student submits a prospectus answering a series of questions that require "introspection" to allow the student to develop insight into proposed educational objectives; and this also gives the faculty a clearer idea of what the student's needs are and what kind of program should be developed. Empire State also has an orientation workshop where tests may be administered and students are given an opportunity to meet with faculty and other students. After matriculation, a plan of study is developed by the student and his mentor that lays out an individualized academic plan taking into account the student's background, interests, and capabilities. Learning contracts, the building blocks for programs of study, typically last from two to three months. After that time an evaluation is made and a new contract is developed. This pattern is continued until it is determined that the student has fulfilled his or her program of study.

At the Community College of Vermont a "Contracting Handbook" is published where the College indicates that three areas known as "program goals" must be satisfied before a student can successfully complete a contract for a degree. The areas are intellectual, social, and manual/physical competence. The Handbook states that at least one of the student's program goals must come from each of the areas.

These program goals at CCV are analogous to contracting at ESC and MMSC. According to Daloz, Coordinator for Learning Services at CCV, only a minority of CCV's students (10 percent) are currently contracting for a degree (Daloz 1973). This means that most of CCV's students are not necessarily preparing themselves to enter into a contracting arrangement and may not be interested in pursuing a degree. CCV's contracts, unlike those at ESC and MMSC, are drawn up only for the entire degree; therefore, any exploratory learning takes place prior to the actual writing of a contract. Presently, eight students have received associate degrees, with another six or eight eligible in October (Daloz 1973).

The learning fields available at CCV are Human Services, Administrative Service, and General Studies. A review committee is comprised of professionals in the student's chosen field, CCV teachers, fellow students, or staff personnel. They are the ones who initially approve a student's learning plan and who decide when the student has earned the associate degree.

At Minnesota Metropolitan State College students participate in an initial orientation program during which time their first contracts are written. The dean of learning development comments:

> What we try to do in orientation is to teach students how to learn. We stress goal-setting and task analysis so they will be able to begin thinking about how they will structure their education. If education is to be ongoing, and serve people throughout their lives, they have to learn how to find answers to problems, where to look them up, people who might know, and so forth (Fedo, p. 8).

Students at MMSC must satisfy five competency areas believed essential for an educated person and must determine how to satisfy them on their own. The areas are: basic learning and communication, civic involvement, vocational or professional competency, the wise use of leisure and recreation, and personal growth and assessment. One student satisfied the civic involvement area by her years as a Girl Scout leader, while her membership in a bridge club and enrollment in ballroom dancing course, which were cited in her contract, fulfilled the leisure and recreational need (p.12). The more academic aspects of her program were within the other categories.

NONTRADITIONAL STUDENT PROFILES

The three contract learning colleges discussed here do not have catalogs with course descriptions, since each contract is a specially created document that reflects the learning needs of one individual. But the colleges do provide profiles of typical students that reveal much about the character of their respective programs. These student profiles are the best way to view the possibilities of personal contract development.

The Empire State College catalog is replete with examples of students who are in the process of completing their contract. One such student is Emma Schmidt. After 17 years of work she was laid off from a factory job and has decided to study for an A.A. degree in social work (p.16). Another is Ruth Van Zandt, a 28-year-old nursery school teacher with an A.A., who wants to teach American history and literature in high school (p.18). Still another student, Dolores Guions, has earned over two hundred college credits from institutions in the U.S. and abroad but was not able to apply these credits toward a specific degree. She is an R.N., is coordinator of Health Occupations at a vocational center, and wants to "direct a private school for practical nurses" (p.24).

At Minnesota Metropolitan State College (MMSC) student profiles are similar to Empire State. For instance, Phyllis Johnson had 20 years of banking experience but no degree and therefore, in her view, no job mobility. Tim Scheehan is a registered nurse and a junior college graduate who wants to switch occupations and become a rehabilitation counselor.

It should be noted that MMSC awards only the baccalaureate degree and that many of its students have upper level college training before they enroll. Many are transfers from the State junior college or from vocational-technical institutes. All must be at least 21 years old and in actuality the average age is 33. Some of these students

> are already established in business or politics; others are housewives, middle-echelon executives, cab drivers, or policemen. Nearly all have full-time jobs, though many have been passed over for promotion

> because they lacked a degree. Few of these people could afford to take time off to return to ordinary classroom study (Fedo 1973, p. 8).

In contrast, the Community College of Vermont (CCV), offering the two-year Associate of Arts degree, profiles a typical student as "Betty Morgan." She is a high school graduate and is employed as a secretary, having started as a file clerk. Her ambition is to be an executive secretary and her program of study is drawn up with the cooperation of her employer and other agencies and institutions that represent learning-in-life experiences—all of which is evaluated and translated into credit.

CONTRACT LEARNING AS A PROGRAM COMPONENT

At other institutions students design their own programs or "contract" as a component of their degree program within the departmental framework using the faculty as teachers or advisors, usually in a classroom setting, with the nature of their program being essentially interdisciplinary and residential (Dressel 1973, pp. 37-42). In this case, no credit is awarded for life experiences prior to entering the program but an attempt is made to translate or evaluate such training under the auspices of the university as a part of the prescribed curricula, in which case credit is awarded in the form of course or semester equivalents.

New College at the University of Alabama provides an illustration of this variation. According to a journal article prepared by the dean of New College and a staff member (Berte 1972), the college has two purposes:

> to create an opportunity for a highly individualized approach to undergraduate education which draws freely from the extensive and diverse scholarship of the entire University faculty, and to serve the University as an experimental unit with the expectation that program concepts, examination and measurement methods, teaching models, use of time, facilities and personnel, and the like will provide an experimental base for modification to undergraduate education (n.p.n.).

The writers stress that New College is not an honors college and that the program is available to students from diverse backgrounds and levels of intellectual achievement but only if they possess motivation and intellectual independence. When a student matriculates at New College "to ease the difficulty of transition from 12 years of structure [traditional high school] to student-centered learning, each New College student has a Contract-Advising Committee to help him tailor a personal curriculum." This is to aid the student in becoming "goal-oriented." The contract is reworked at least annually, since an entering freshman is not expected to know exactly what he wants to do upon matriculation. The course work is in the form of seminars in disciplinary areas within the humanities, natural and social sciences. The seminars are designed to allow the student to "pursue the relationships and interdependencies between these and other bodies of knowledge." As at ESC, MMSC, and CCV, the chief idea behind this approach is the *practical* integration of knowledge.

PROGRAM EVALUATION

One of the chief problems with independent study is how to evaluate what students have learned. This is especially problematic when students apply to graduate schools that are used to dealing with credit hours and Graduate Record Examinations. Obviously, evaluation is dependent on who is doing the evaluating and why; consequently, a range of opinion might be anticipated as to what are and are not significant factors in a given student's record, no matter what form that record takes.

Dressel and Thompson (1973) devote a chapter of their book on *Independent Study* to building and evaluating independent study programs. They outline several views of what the aim of independent study should be (p. 107, 108). One view holds that substantive outcomes are nonessential and that attempts to evaluate achievement levels are "inconsequential, perhaps even undesirable" (p. 107). The authors believe that independent study experience is valid only if it "results in development or growth in regard to generally accepted educational objectives" (p. 103). However, there is often debate over just what constitutes "generally accepted educational objectives."

At MMSC "most faculty members feel confident that general agreement exists on what constitutes a baccalaureate effort" (Fedo 1973). One faculty member is quoted as saying:

> Our students seem to understand what a degree is worth. They often subject themselves to demands that no ordinary college would attempt to impose. Since they know they're responsible for the end result of their education, they want to make sure they aren't cheated or ripped-off along the way. At least that's been our experience thus far (p.10).

However, at ESC three of the graduates commented on the "incompatibility" of their program with traditional ways of teaching and testing.

> One graduate, unable to tolerate a lock-step curriculum withdrew after completing the first part of her business program. Another was told by the graduate school to which she applied that GRE scores would have to be counted more heavily than usual because ESC was relatively unknown. She felt that such a survey test had little to do with the educational programs which she had pursued at ESC (Palola and Ogden December 1972, p. 2).

Empire State reported initially that of its twenty-seven graduates (December 1972), thirteen had applied to graduate schools, most of which were in New York State. Seven were accepted, one rejected (by Rensselaer), and five were waiting to hear (Palola and Ogden, December 1972, p. 2).

In a subsequent report, ESC graduates commented about their experience as students and what their present status was. One student said he was given credit "for what I've done and what I know!" However, his final observation sums up the predicament for some who engage in nontraditional learning: the problem of acceptance of credentials as bona fide by other academic institutions and by prospective employers.

> I've really enjoyed and support what ESC is trying to do, and is doing to a great degree . . . but I've also been screwed by the college, or my age [56 years old], or something [perhaps unrealistic goals] because I haven't been able to land a decent job in architecture or urban renewal, my application to the graduate program in building sciences, although informally ok'd, was finally rejected, and now I'm selling furniture again, but for someone else (Palola and Bradley 1973, p. 18).

CONCLUSIONS

In contract learning the emphasis is more on process and less on outcomes per se, since there are no grades but only a series of contracts approved. Theoretically, a student could fail to carry out a self-assigned task yet in the process gain insights and knowledge that would warrant "credit."

There can be no doubt that living and learning should be intrinsically related, especially in an educational setting. To find ways of devising educational programs to accommodate this ideal is crucial. Chickering believes

> students must clarify for themselves where they stand and must determine for themselves where they want to go and how they want to get there ... the institution's task is not to alter a loose-fitting strait jacket for a more precisely tailored one. It is, instead, to increase the range of alternatives through which student development can proceed (Chickering 1972, pp. 318-319).

If, as Fedo says, "the external degree concept promises opportunities for advanced learning that no traditional college can match" (p.12), then the question of evaluation may be moot. Ways will be found to recognize the exemplary nature and purpose of these programs. But if traditional means of evaluation remain the sine qua non of accrediting groups,* examining boards, and institutions of higher education, not to mention employers, then the benefits of nontraditional programs in general and contract learning in particular may be in jeopardy. That a number of talented, energetic people—many of whom received terminal degrees at traditional institutions—are willing to engage in administering contract learning programs, is one sign that at least some members of the traditional academic community believe much is to be gained by participating in nontraditional forms of learning.

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*See Federation of Regional Accrediting Commissions of Higher Education's "Interim Guidelines on Contractual Relationships with Non-regionally Accredited Organizations" and "Interim Statement on Accreditation and Non-traditional Study," both published March 14, 1973.

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